

“TRANSFORMED BY LOVE”

Last Sunday in Epiphany – February 22, 2004 – Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Today, the Epiphany season draws to a close with the story of the Transfiguration. We might also call this “Transition Sunday.” It is the bridge between the church seasons of Epiphany and Lent. The Transfiguration talks about the “mountain-top” experience, meeting God. Now we have to go back down into the valley.

Do you remember those road signs in the television series “Mash?” There was a large pole in the center of the compound with arrows pointing to different important places. One arrow pointed to home, where everyone wanted to be, 3000 miles away. Another pointed to Seoul, a fifty some miles away. There was Tokyo, an important place for rest and relaxation some hundreds of miles away. There was Moscow, heart of the enemy thousands of miles away. The sign gave people in the camp a sense of where they could go.

If we were to put such a road sign in the middle of the Transfiguration, it would contain three signs. One would state, “You are here,” speaking of the present. Another arrow would point back to the Baptism of Jesus in the River Jordan, the past. The third would point to Jerusalem and the crucifixion yet to come. There are important theological themes here. Moses and Elijah appear, pointing us towards an understanding of Jesus fulfilling the law and the prophets. Jesus brings to a climax the saving work of God.

The Transfiguration prepares us for Ash Wednesday and our Lenten journey. Epiphany is the season of revelation; we come to see who he is by the stories and signs. It starts, on the Feast of the Epiphany, with the shining of a star in the sky at his birth. The star shows us where to find Jesus. It ends on the mountain with the face of Jesus shining. First God points us to Jesus, and then we see God in Jesus. These are “theophanies”, glimpses of God.

Luke provides us with a unique perspective this morning on the Transfiguration. The evangelist adds things to his story that tells us what Luke found important. First, Jesus prays before significant events in his ministry. He prays on the mountain before the glory is revealed. What is pray but a divine connection? Prayer is an intimate relationship with God. It shows us how close Jesus is to God.

Next, Luke says that Moses and Elijah were talking with Jesus about his departure. Do you know what the Greek word is for departure? It’s “exodus.” Where is Jesus going? He’s going to Jerusalem to face the religious and political authorities. Jesus is going on a journey. The transfiguration points us towards some other place. Here we have echoes of the Exodus. It was the story of the Israelites not only leaving Egypt, but on their way to the promised land. What is important is what happens along the way! Jesus is leaving the mountain, and we need to pay attention to what happens along the way. All of this has bearing on our life. We might ask ourselves, where are we going?

Luke also contains the story of Peter’s misunderstanding. Poor Peter, it gets it wrong! I like Peter. It reminds me of myself. I don’t always get it right. Peter, like us, wants to capture the moment. He wants to build a temple to enshrine it. He wants to encase God.

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We are no different, we try to hold onto the mountain top experience or try to recreate it. The reality is that God is an elusive presence. God can't be confined to our boxes.

Finally, Luke has divine words spoken from a cloud. Just for our information, anytime we hear about a pillar of fire or a cloud, know that God has shown up on the scene. The words here at the Transfiguration are “This is my son, my chosen, listen to him.” It echoes the words in Luke's Gospel from the Baptism. There at the river, a dove appears, and the words are spoken, “You are my son, the beloved, with you I'm well pleased.” Notice the difference! At the baptism, the words are directed only at Jesus. Now, at the Transfiguration, the words are directed to us. We are told to LISTEN to Jesus. This will become vital in the days ahead on the Lenten journey.

The Transfiguration is a turning point. The journey shifts from Galilee to Jerusalem, from Epiphany to Lent. The mountain gives us a glimpse of God's vision. It is set in the context of prayer. It is in community. We are told to listen to Jesus. What do we hear Jesus say? This is where Paul's writing comes to bear. Jesus brings a message of love. It is the love of God that will make a difference, save us.

We have forgotten the basic message of Christianity, to love. I am so tired of the controversies. I am weary of the threats of leaving and schism. The basic message of Christianity is not the rule in most people's lives. There is too much focus on a few verses of the Bible, and their interpretation, while ignoring the overall message of the rest. We are not called to be a people of rules and regulations. Our church battles today ignore the whole thrust of the New Testament. As Christians, we are called to love, sacrificial love.

Epiphany is a time of revelation. It answers for us, “Who is Jesus.” Lent is now coming. This is the journey of self-examination. We will have to answer the question, “Who is Jesus for me?” It is time for us to understand Jesus is about love. It is time to bring God's love back into our lives and the world.

How do we make sense of the Transfiguration in our world? Most of you know that I have been wrestling with my mother's death. I am astonished how silent we are in the culture about death. Since my mother's death, I have had to deal almost every week with parishioners who have had a loved one died. Is this a coincidence? I don't think so. What do I make of my life and my mother's?

For Christmas, I was given a book by Mitch Albom, “The Five People You Meet in Heaven.” Guess what it was about? You're right, death! It talks about a man who thought his life had no meaning, until he gets to heaven and finds out from five people what it meant. Someone told me I had to read his other book, “Tuesdays with Morrie.” Okay, I agreed, guess what ... it was about death too! Mitch spoke of learning about his mentor in college dying from ALS.

He spent Tuesdays traveling to see Morrie. They spend time talking about what is really important. It takes something like dying, or losing a job, or becoming seriously ill. Morrie reminds Mitch that the meaning of life is not to be found in money, or things, or

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power or status. Morrie says what’s most important is to be loving! Is this a conspiracy or what? The love of a parent and child are arrows, signs that point us towards the love of God.

The mountain top seems so distant. I feel like we live in the valley most of the time. We are surrounded by fear, despair and confusion. It seems that there is no vision, no hope or no dreams. Maybe our visions have grown old. There is no sense of movement, growth or life. It is into these times that witnesses come. I struggle with making sense of my mother’s death. Then, I am asked by a daughter to pray and visit her dying mother. Next, I am called by a son to come and give his mother last rites. This past week I am asked to visit a family that mourns the sudden death of a husband, brother-in-law and uncle.

In all of these circumstances, I become aware of the overriding presence, called love. Each time, in the valley of darkness, there is a glimmer, a glimpse of light. A silent and prayerful presence grows brighter. There is love.

Our journey now is to listen to him. Jesus has so much to teach us about love. He is love itself. In Holy Baptism, we die to the old to become a new person. We are transfigured, a new creation. The language of this liturgy doesn’t talk about keeping our old and comfortable ways. We go up the mountain, but then we have to come back into the valley. Will we revert to our old, ordinary and selfish ways? Or will we become a new people, sign bearers, love ambassadors?

Our search for God may take us all over the place. Are we looking for something or someone that will affirm what we already believe and do? Or are we looking for a new person, a new vision ... God’s vision? To come face to face with God is to listen to Jesus. It is to journey to and through our cross.

The mountain top is meant to transfigure us. We are to become transformed, changed. It means overcoming our resistance, fatigue and apathy. We have to overcome the desire to fix a booth at one point and think that we have arrived! We are to listen to Jesus. He is not our culture, our prejudice, or our fear. Jesus invites us to learn to live the commandment to love. Only love matters. It’s not rules and regulations, it’s not even our institutional church. Transfiguration speaks about being shaped and transformed by God. It helps us to make sense of what happened in the past, where we are now, and where we are going.

Luke leaves us with two questions this morning. What do you see on the mountain? And, what will you carry into the valley.